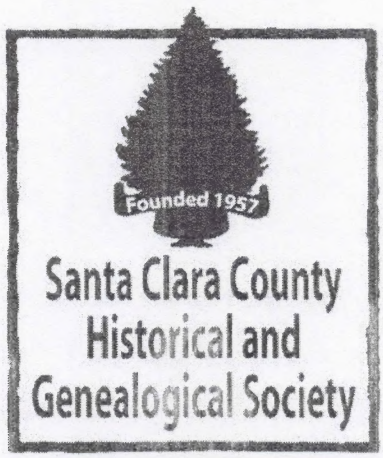
Sunnyvale Air Base

By Helen Jarret

Written as part of the Federal Writers' Project, a Works Progress Administration (WPA) Project, 1936

Notes:

- Original in possession of the Santa Clara County Archives, San Jose, California
- Scanned by the Santa Clara Historical and Genealogical Society



Helen Jarret
Federal Writers' Projects No.I
Santa Clara County, California

✓ (1)

CLASS V ARMY AND NAVY

SUNNYVALE AIR BASE

Moffett Field, originally the United States Naval Air Station, is located at Sunnyvale, Santa Clara County, six miles northwest of San Jose, the county seat, and forty-four miles southwest of San Francisco, has become one of the outstanding tourist attractions of the Pacific Coast. The enormous hangar, or dock, built originally for dirigibles of the Macon type, the helium purification plant, the barracks for officers and men, and the thirty-seven other structures and buildings on the thousand acre reservation, adjacent to the four lane Bayshore Highway from San Francisco to San Jose, are the main features of the Station.

Visitors hours are from 9:00 A. M. to 5:00 P. M. every day, including Sundays and holidays. Cameras are not allowed.

The United States Naval Air Station is the physical embodiment of co-operative effort on the part of citizens of San Jose, Santa Clara County, and the San Francisco Bay Region. This united community worked actively through 1929 and 1930 on the project. Reports of a special naval investigation board found the present site ideal from a climatic, geographic, and strategic standpoint.

Actual purchase of the property took place on July 30, 1931, with a check amounting to $476,065.90 for the thousand acres. The deed to the property was officially delivered to governmental and naval officials at a cere-

CLASS V ARMY AND NAVY

SUNNYVALE AIR BASE
(Continued)

mony on the morning of August 3, 1931, in the Marine Room of the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce.

Actual construction began on October 5, 1931. There are more than forty buildings and structures on the Station and a total of $4,800,000.00 has been spent on construction so far.

The hangar is of most interest to the visitor. This streamlined building is 1133 feet, or three city blocks in length, 308 feet in width and 194 feet, or 18 stories, in height. The unobstructed floor space would allow for eight football games to take place at one time. The huge doors which are the shape of a one eighth orange peel, weigh 250 tons each, and require a 150 horsepower motor to move it. There are 8300 tons of steel in the structure, and features that should be noted are the overhead cranes and catwalks, the specially constructed ladders, the unique elevator and the excellent distribution of light, both naturally and artificially. The total volume of the hangar is 50,000,000 cubic feet.

More than forty acres in the building district of the station are landscaped and all services such as water, natural gas, electric power and even telephone are underground. The two mooring circles, 1800 feet from each end of the hangar, are 643 feet in radius and each comprise 30 acres.

CLASS V ARMY AND NAVY

SUNNYVALE AIR BASE
(Continued)

The large "K" shaped runways east of the hangar are 1500 feet long and 300 feet wide. A few other interesting facts regarding the Station are that 108 telephones with extensions are installed in different parts of the many structures; that in addition to the most modern equipment in the hospital there are twenty beds to provide for those of the Station's personnel who may be hurt in accidents. More than 800 meals are served daily.

There were 29 Naval officers and 162 enlisted Navy men, 10 Marine officers and 120 enlisted Marines, regularly stationed at the Base. The Macon, which used the airport as its base, was a Naval airship especially built for long range scouting operations. On October 25, 1935 the Naval unit at Sunnyvale airport was transferred to San Diego and the Army took charge of the airbase. Washington considered that the naval stations at San Francisco and San Diego were sufficient for the present. It is understood that should the Navy decide to continue dirigible development, it could have the Sunnyvale field for its base again. The outgoing chief of the station was Commander Alfred T. Clay for the Navy. The new Commander was Lieutenant-Colonel Horace N. Heisen of the Army.

An amusing incident occurred when the Army Post

CLASS V ARMY AND NAVY

SUNNYVALE AIR BASE
(Continued)

forgot to send a flag along with other supplies. The Navy consented to loan the Army their flag until the Army's arrived, stating, "What's the difference! They are the same stars and stripes whether owned by the Army or the Navy."

Although Moffett Field was named after Rear-Admiral William Moffett of the Navy, the army will maintain the name out of respect to Admiral Moffett who died in the crash of the airship Akron off the New Jersey Coast in April 1933.

Sources:

San Jose Chamber of Commerce

San Jose Mercury Herald October 25, 1935

Recruiting Officer for Moffett Field

Federal Writers' Projects
District 9
Albert E. Johansson

April 1, 1936

V (2)

S-300

CLASS V - ARMY AND NAVY

The Regular Army maintains a recruiting post in San Jose, whose existence has been desultory, and whose future is not assured.

Military posts within easy reach of the central part of this district are the Presidio of San Francisco, garrisoned by the 30th Infantry; Fort Winfield Scott, garrisoned by the 6th coast artillery, and the Presidio of Monterey, garrisoned by the 11th cavalry and the 76th field artillery.

After the loss of the dirigible Macon, the air field at Sunnyvale was turned over to the army, and at present is occupied by that arm of the service, used as a base for heavier-than-air craft. The immense hangar, which used to house a giant dirigible, can be seen for miles. Administration and housing buildings at this station are in typical California-Spanish style, and have all modern facilities for the convenience of those stationed at the post, which is known as Moffett Field after the admiral lost in the Akron. This base is located on the Bayshore highway.

In this district are stationed five Regular Navy men. Two of these are at Sunnyvale, survivors of former naval occupation. Three are with the recruiting office in the Postoffice Building in San Jose, where the army recruiting office is also located. Naval recruiting has been maintained here regularly for sixteen years.

April 1, 1936

S-300

CLASS V - ARMY AND NAVY
(continued)

The 5th Fleet Division of the Naval Reserve was first established in 1923 and reorganized in 1925. At present it numbers 90 men and 7 officers, and is under the control of Lt. H. H. Hallin. 8 men in this outfit were formerly of the Regular Navy. The Armory of the 5th Division is located at 55 South Market street, San Jose, California. Drills are held on Tuesday nights.

The 4th Fleet Division of the Naval Reserve has its headquarters in Santa Cruz and is under the command of Lt. Com. Willey. Its complement is practically the same as that of the San Jose detachment.

Communication sections are maintained by the Naval Reserve at Palo Alto, San Jose, San Mateo, and Santa Cruz. The Eagle 32 is stationed in San Francisco for the training of Naval Reserve units of this district.

The 159th Infantry of the National Guard saw service in the Spanish-American War and on the Mexican Border as the 5th California Infantry. During the World War a unit of this same regiment marched out of San Jose to participate in the major Allied offensives. National Guard organizations, offspring of the former 5th (now the 159th regiment of the 41st division) include Co. E of San Jose, a rifle company, and Co. H, of the same city, equipped with machine guns. Co. D of the 184th Infantry has its center of concentration in Gilroy. It is a machine gun unit. All

S-300

CLASS V - ARMY AND NAVY
(continued)

three organizations were mobilized for the labor troubles in San Francisco in 1934.

A new Armory, costing $50,000, has been recently built in San Jose for the two companies stationed there. It is located on North Second street. On Monday and Tuesday nights it is the scene of drills.

Lt. Col. Mitchell, second-in-command of the 159th Infantry lives in San Jose. He can be found in the traffic department of the City Hall.

Naval vessels visit Santa Cruz, Capitola, Monterey, and San Francisco, where they may be visited. Vallejo, where dockyards are located, is within easy distance of this district.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Consultants:

Hackett - C.Q.M. U.S.N.

Naval Recruiting Office

Army Recruiting Office

Hallin - Lt. U.S.N.R.

(Note): Sunnyvale Air Base visited, and officer of the day interviewed.